

Interviewee: Lynette Richards

Interviewer: Liz Fitting

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The following interview was conducted as part of the Nova Scotia LGBT Seniors' Archive's Lesbian Oral Histories Project.

LF: We're wondering if you can tell us a little about yourself to start off with in terms of your age, gender, sexual orientation and how long you've been in Nova Scotia and that kind of thing.

LR: Yeah sure. Well, I'm 60 years old, born in 1961. I was born in Ontario and lived there until 10 years ago. I came out in 1994. Had 3 kids by then. Yes, I was born female and still identify as female.

LF: Where in Ontario were you?

LR: I was born near Peterborough, but I grew up in London Ontario, and then spent time in Toronto, and back in Peterborough, and back to London.

LF: Great, and how would you describe your sexual identity, your gender expression.

LR: As I said, born female. I'm a lesbian and yeah, that's it.

LF: Great, and what have, so you've been here for 10 years, and I guess the project is wondering what your experiences have been like interacting with the LGBTQ+ community here in Nova Scotia and maybe you could talk a little bit of what it was like back in Ontario for comparative purposes.

LR: Yeah, ok well I can tell you my experiences here, it's quite fresh so – I guess it was about 9 years ago that my spouse and I, Nadia, moved here, and we moved to a remote town called Terrance Bay and surprisingly found all kinds of lesbians here and so settling into community of gay women was really simple here. The first thing that you should know is that we are both self-employed so when we came here, we knew no one and we had to find not only social community, but we had to find professional client base as well. We searched and found a lesbian and gay business association and we went to a meeting here and met a few people and unfortunately it was their last ever meeting, but still we made a couple of connections through that and I have to say that in Ontario and here, it's been lesbian and gay men who have supported my practice first, and then the rest of the world catches up and comes on board and so it's, I often wonder why do we hang out with mostly, with lesbians and gay men and ah, you know I think about that because I don't discriminate but there's a comfort level and a mutuality of support, a foundational understanding, stuff we don't have to go over that's just real comforting.

LF: And so, back in Ontario you had a similar kind of community around you?

LR: Yeah, so in London, Ontario we lived in the city, so ah, and also we were raising children, so in that case we kind of met most of our peers through the kids, and through the parents of the kids, and a funny thing is, that a, each of our children ended up finding a best friend at school who had a gay parent unbeknownst to any of us, so there was some kind of an affinity going on there, a recognition within peers, but, in London we were surrounded by a lot more people all the times, so it was strangely harder to find community than it was in Nova Scotia.

LF: And did you say when you came out...did you -

LR: 1994.

LF: 1994. And do you have a coming out story that you would be able to share with us?

LR: Absolutely, yeah, so I went to art school until 1979, and I met my then to be husband there and we were together 15 years and had 3 children and I was a professional in the printing industry, I had done an apprenticeship in the male dominated field called film stripping, but when I went off to have kids, it became computerized, and I no longer had a career to return to. But I, after the, I also found out while having children that raising kids was far more important than making litter, essential is what I was doing, on tight deadlines, in the printing industry and it made me kind of re-evaluate the work that women have done in society from a feminist perspective and realized that the most important work of raising children and creating home, and if you think of the earth as home, caring for home, that's the most important work and yet it was so dismissed, it was shocking, so by having children I re-evaluated my work life, I re-evaluated my social life. I lost friends because they didn't want to hang out with people with children – I ah, let's see what else.

I, we moved cities back to London, and essentially I found myself quite isolated and I got pretty depressed, and I spent a year very, very depressed, and you know, trying to get out of this quagmire and um, in the midst of it, I fell in love with a woman. And I was sort of reactivated by the awakened emotions and eroticism and I knew, you know I had spent my whole adult life to that point hanging around with women and a lot of them were lesbians and doing that work in the world, building women's shelters, and whatnot and suddenly I realized, my god, I'm a lesbian, and so I left my marriage to explore this new aspect of me and there was no going back. The first time that I had sex with a woman, a part of me awakened that I didn't even know was lying latent and then I realized that I was whole, finally, for the first time... and it wasn't just sex, obviously, there's so much more; it's now been – I've been with Nadia, ah, 23 years now and she wasn't the first person that I came out to, but, there's so much more

LF: So that was kinda towards the end of the AIDS crisis – do you feel like that crisis and the reaction to it by the media, and the real vitriol affected you at all in your coming out process

LR: Affected me – the vitriol, ah well, I'm not sure I'm going to relate the vitriol directly to the Aids crisis. There was vitriol towards women who rejected the male kind of hetero normalcy but ah, certainly we knew people, before I came out and after I came out, we knew gay men who suffered incredibly through the AIDS crisis, lost partners, and, but we know a fella in London who, ah, he was one of the first guys to go retro, so that the virus suppressed itself so much that he could essentially say he no longer was HIV positive, essentially. And so we were kind of there witnessing this miracle, too, but the vitriol towards lesbians – I actually remember when I was a child, a friend of mine in high school had a lesbian mother, who lived in the neighbourhood, this suburban neighbourhood, and when she came out, her husband, I guess, took her to court or whatever and she had to relinquish custody of her kids, and so I was pretty terrified as a mother with three little kids, what the response would be. So I stayed closeted a little bit for their sake, but it didn't turn out to be a great issue at the school.

LF: And what's your relationship like with your family? It sounds like you managed to create a family for yourself and recreate family – what's the relationship been like for you with your family?

LR: I have three siblings, and ah, my mother's dead now, she passed about seven years ago, and my dad's still alive, but I am, ah, estranged from them. Not because of being gay, though, it's because it was a dysfunctional family in the first place, but when I did come out, my parents weren't actually surprised. They were a bit progressive, as it goes, but my mom got sick and then they ended up at the Pentecostal Church, and it was through that kind of dogma that they decided that gay wasn't ok, and they started, you know, influencing the kids, my kids, so ah, we had a fight.

LF: That sounds difficult. Have you, do you feel that you've experienced discrimination based on being a lesbian?

LR: Well, I guess, most people would recognize discrimination I suspect in the workplace, either being denied work or dismissed from work, or treated badly at work, and I'm self-employed, so, and I've actually self-employed as a stained-glass restoration and repair person, so I worked with church communities, so that's been like an interesting dance. Some church communities are, you know, they super love to have somebody who's a lesbian on their team – looks good on them. Other churches are pretty stridently opposed to homosexuality so, that's an interesting dance. I can't tell you what jobs I don't get because I'm gay, but I'm not hiding it, but nor am I flaunting it. All I have to do is look on Facebook, or whatever, and they can find out who I am and what I believe. So, I don't know if I felt discrimination for being a lesbian specifically. I have to say, I have felt discrimination about being a woman, and that is kind of the lens that I see. Think that if you're going to get dismissed, it's probably going to be for being female in this world still.

LF: And I guess, we're wondering, have you ever, have you donated materials to a queer or LGBT archive before?

LR: Oh, well I actually made a large stained-glass window for the Weldon Library in University of Western Ontario's Pride Library, and it's on Wikipedia. You can look it up, and I also did a big stained glass for the Lesbian and Gay Archives [ArQuives] in Toronto, but in terms of donating – well I have a graphic novel I've just completed. It's getting published next September, and I'll be donating it to the libraries.

LF: Wonderful. So, I just have a couple more questions and they're about whether you've had any experiences as a child that you think were affected by your sexuality, and then questions about, you know, how do you see your experiences different from young people today – that kind of thing

LR: Well, yeah, as a child I didn't fit. I didn't fit most of my life and that's just kind of just the way it is, but I didn't really know why until I was much older, and started to understand the possibilities. But this is such a familiar story, I mean I just never fit the gender stereotype of a little girl. Hated dolls, hated pink, hated dresses, hated Barbies, hated all the little games girls did, hated the sniping. I was a little kid on the bike that liked the woods, and picked up snakes, and I was shy. I was a tomboy, but I wasn't athletic, so I didn't fit teams either, but, no it just took me a long time to sort of understand why, what the discordance was. And I don't think my peers really knew what to do with me either, in that sense, so today I would say that, you know, kids can be demonstrably gender queer and I think that it's, it's celebrated right now. I think it's – I think there's such a wide diversity of ways of being now than there was when I was a kid. So, I don't know if that answers your question.

LF: Do you have any advice for a younger generation who are members of the LGBTQ+ community?

LR: Advice. Well – I think that everybody spends a lifetime trying to figure out who they are, really who they are on the inside and that once that's figured out that come hell or high water they should live that life, and um, that's worthwhile, definitely worthwhile.

LF: Yeah. Is there anything that we haven't covered that you feel like is important to cover?

LR: Well, I think that being a relative newcomer to Nova Scotia and having found Terrance Bay and Lower Prospect to be absolutely alive with lesbians, it not only, not only is it still got a lot of people here, each of us kind of having found our little remote nook in the woods, by the ocean, it seems that this little community has a history of that. I am, so when I came out in 1994 in London, I found myself in a community of activists, and one of the things that they did was they put on the London Lesbian Film Festival, which is one of the longest running, perhaps THE longest running film festival in North America, for lesbians. And I watched, you know, years of films - it was in April – at this film festival and then moved here, and it turns out one of the film makers that made films I saw in 1994 lives down the road and now we're really good friends, and she's been telling me about this little island at the end of the road where a bunch of lesbians

used to live in like a homestead down there, and it turns out that some of those lesbians were friends with some of the women that I was with coming out in 1994. So, all of these communities seemed to connect and interconnect, and I've just found that kind of magical in a way to know that, you know, it's like the roots under the earth were communicating like the trees and the mushrooms do somehow and staying connected. I like that.

LF: Yeah, that's beautiful.

LR: It, there must be something about Nova Scotia. You'll have to tell me.

LF: Well, lets see. I've been here 17 years, and I spent a lot of time outside of the province when I first got here, so it took me a while actually to get to know the place and the region and find a community here.

LR: It did eh, yeah. The graphic novel that I've just written is based on the wreck of the SS *Atlantic* which happened at the end of the road in 1873, and it was a passenger liner from Liverpool to New York – one of the first of the White Star Liners, and it had a thousand people on it, and when it struck the rocks it broke in half, and the back half – it was 3:00 in the morning, April 1st – the back half which had all of the women asleep, sunk immediately and every woman and child died. So those rescued were all men. Those dead were buried in two mass graves at the end of our road here, and when they were preparing the dead for burial, it turns out that one of the sailors was female. So, I figured out who that person is, was, and I've written that story in the graphic novel.

LF: Oh, fascinating. Great. So any other memories that you feel like would contribute to this oral history archive, or any other, that's a, I'm going to look for this graphic novel. Is it published? Or is it...

LR: I feel like I've just landed in heaven down here in Terrance Bay and Lower Prospect. You know, that's all I can think of.

LF: Wonderful, well thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it,

LR: Thanks Liz.

LF: Ok, take care.